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The School of Language and Liberal Arts Writing Program and Retention at Fanshawe College

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Introduction

Student retention has remained, over many decades, a strong area of concern in postsecondary education, for good reason. Retaining students is a key factor in an institution's maintenance of its stability and reputation, and it helps students and society to avoid the all-too-common consequences associated with a lack of education, including underemployment and poverty.

Ontario's Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology have improved their graduation rates slightly in recent years. Although the most recent year of reporting shows a distinct upward surge in graduation rates (Colleges Ontario, 2007), given the historical record on retention (Grayson, 2003), it will remain to be seen whether the recent improvement is an anomaly. Fanshawe College's own rates of graduation have typically remained slightly below Ontario's average figures, year-by-year (Drea, 2004).

Remedial and developmental education offerings are an important response to student attrition. However, developmental education does attract controversy among those who feel taxpayers should not have to support supplementary instruction for postsecondary students who failed to build the necessary skills for success during their K-12 years. Some critics point to low program completion rates among developmental education students as a sign that remedial education is "a hoax perpetrated upon academically weak students who will be unlikely to graduate" (Attewell, p. 887).

Remedial and developmental education is one response to attrition recently adopted within the School of Language and Liberal Arts at Fanshawe College, in the form of a Writing Program. An examination of the literature on retention strategy, best practices, and remediation's place within the area of retention hold promise to guide future action in this area.

The conclusions contained in this report focus on remedial/developmental education within the framework of retention efforts. These conclusions differ from those of the remediation critics. In addition to surveying the literature linking remediation and retention, this paper will also examine the theoretical framework behind much of the research on retention and catalogue some of the best principles and practices documented in these interrelated fields.

II. The Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

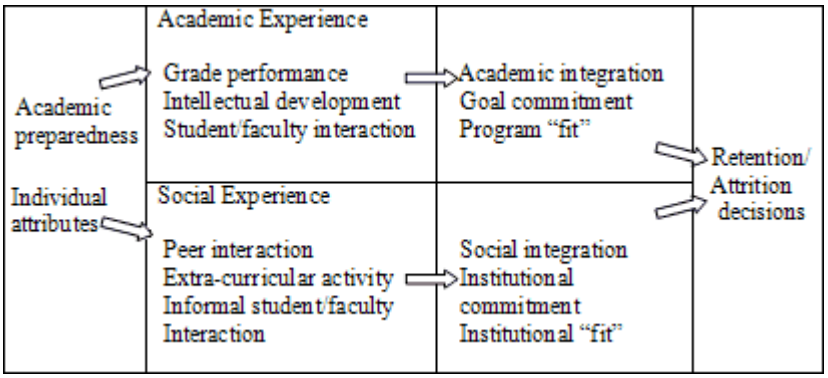
Much of the research literature on student retention is based on sociological, psychological and educational theory explaining the mechanisms that influence students to persist or withdraw from their studies, as well as theories helping to describe the phenomena of student

engagement and student development. Of greatest note are Tinto's Student Retention Model (1975), Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984), Braxton's support of active learning (2000), Bean's Student Attrition Model (1982), and Chickering's Student Development Theory (1969).

As the majority of research in the areas of student retention will sometimes link to remedial/developmental education, it is important to consider these interlocking theories and to provide some background.

Tinto's model looks at the issues from a sociological point of view, pointing to the importance of integrating the new student into the life of the institution, both socially and academically. In this model, positive interactions between students and faculty are seen as critical steps toward retention. Bean's Student Attrition Model maps out a complex set of psychological processes, including coping and self-efficacy skills, and locus of control orientation, by which postsecondary students come to either abandon or persist in their studies.

Simplified "Student Integration Model" (based on Tinto, 1975, 1993).



Educational theorists Astin, Braxton and Chickering each contribute other important pieces of the theoretical framework. According to Astin, the involvement of students in their educational activities is key in retention. Braxton posits on the value of active, rather than passive learning in ensuring postsecondary students see value in their education, leading to persistence. Chickering's model classifies student development according to various "vectors" for development during postsecondary education. The competence vector, developed during a successful student's freshman and sophomore years, includes intellectual competence (knowledge, critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) as well as social competence (interactions and communication skills).

These global theories have been tested and refined by their authors as well as by many other researchers seeking to explore issues of student and institutional success and failure, as well as relationships between the many variables involved in student persistence. Some key research findings which apply directly to the policies and practices of the SLLS Writing Program will be discussed in the sections below.

III. Three Key Findings of the Research

Decades have elapsed since researchers began to study the problem of student attrition and to apply the results of their research to the problem. Some of the key institutional priorities and principles underlying successful retention strategies can be generalized as follows:

1. Focus primarily on supporting student success and achievement; retention will follow.

The literature agrees that the social and academic welfare of the student are paramount, with retention resulting as an indirect effect:

Tinto concludes his groundbreaking and much-cited work, Leaving College (1987), with Six Principles for Institutional Action, the sixth of which reads as follows: “6. Education, not retention, should be the goal of institutional retention programs” (p. 146).

Noel (1985) explains the interrelatedness of student success and retention in this way: “The more students learn, the more they sense they are finding and developing a talent, the more likely they are to persist; and when we get student success, satisfaction, and learning together, persistence is the outcome. Reenrollment or retention is not then the goal; retention is the result or by-product of improved programs and services in our classrooms and elsewhere on campus that contribute to student success” (p. 1).

Hassel & Lourey (2004) cite results from a survey of 1,100 university students (plus faculty and administration) in which all parties agreed that the most important factors in student retention are “good teaching,” “quality of instruction” “helpful staff” and “faculty who are genuinely interested in students” (p. 8).

Heverly (1999) indicates that students who agreed with survey statements about instructors’ respect and concern for them, and whose instructors were aware of their level of understanding of course content, were more likely to return (p. 8).

Ryan & Glenn (2002) cite quality of instruction and faculty as a key indicator predicting re-enrollment (p. 301).

Carini et al (2006) find that the most academically at-risk students appeared to benefit the most greatly of all from quality of relationships and a supportive atmosphere on campus, literacy skills development and interaction with faculty and that “taken as a whole, these findings suggest that institutional interventions to boost student engagement may have the greatest payoff for those most at-risk for leaving college prematurely.” (p. 16).

In helping to build academic skills, especially among weaker students, the SLLS Writing Program is acting according to this key overarching principle of student retention.

2. Ensure first-year retention programming is especially proactive in meeting students’ needs.

Proactive measures will seek to meet students at their current level of ability and to ensure that it is the institution, and not the student, that initiates the activities that engage students and ultimately increase their likelihood of success.

Beatty-Guenter (2007) discusses a systematic approach to actively assisting freshmen under the categorizes of “sorting, supporting, connecting and transforming” which, as the categories suggest, include

assessment testing, individual counseling, fostering relationships among students and between students and faculty, and skills development.

Andres & Carpenter (1997) cite the Student Retention Model of Billson & Brooks-Terry (1987) which begins at the outreach stage with high school students, continues after recruitment with skills assessments, summer skills upgrading programs, academics skills orientations and other ongoing forms of proactive programming.

Barefoot (2005) calls for strong coordination of effort in student support efforts to create an atmosphere of “coherence and seamlessness” to prevent contradiction and disorder in the ways students are served.

Boylan et al (1999) and Kozeracki (2002) recommend similarly comprehensive developmental programs that begin at or before registration to ensure students have or acquire the skills they need to succeed in postsecondary studies.

Keup (2006) describes a study whose sample includes 19,995 students participating in a survey at the end of their first year in various postsecondary institutions across the U.S. Conclusions include a call to ensure first-year postsecondary programming is designed to empower students and encourage their participation.

Roueche & Roueche (1994) signal the urgency of serving the “at-risk” student. Their survey of best practices, based on 12 successful community college programs for at-risk students, include proactive pre-enrollment activities, mandatory skills assessment and placement, requiring problem-solving and literacy activities in all courses.

Beck & Davidson (2001) describe a highly proactive and comprehensive early-warning system, which correlates results from a survey of academic orientations with early dropout. The results give administrators the ability to more accurately predict which students, based on their survey responses, should be approached by academic counselors before they begin to experience performance or motivation problems.

As we will see in subsequent examinations, these general principles are translated into specific policies within Fanshawe’s Writing Program.

3. Seek to increase student integration and skill levels.

Taking to heart Tinto’s and Noel’s admonishments to focus on supporting student success and achievement, many of the most successful retention programs tend to have skills development and academic preparation as their primary aims, while simultaneously assisting students to become integrated within the institution, both socially and academically. Although the types of programs described below are not specifically (or exclusively) remedial, they share a great deal in common with Fanshawe’s Writing Program and are documented in the literature references provided as some of the “best practices” in retention and/or through empirical studies confirming their effectiveness.

The Freshman Seminar, or Freshman Year Experience, typically combines career advisement and decision-making with student survival topics like time management and academic skills such as test-taking (Bean & Eaton 2001; Cuseo 1997; Davig & Spain 2003, Folger et al 2004;

Goodman & Pascarella 2006; Hoffman et al 2002; Keup 2005; Porter & Swing 2006; Ryan & Glenn 2002)

Supplementary Instruction refers to programs in which students in courses identified as having a low student success rate are split into smaller supplementary tutorial groups led by master students in order to focus on key skills and knowledge (McCarthy & Smuts 1997; Ryan & Glenn 2002)

Learning Communities allow students to follow a common block of courses during the first term or the first whole year in order to encourage student community and increase comfort levels in student-faculty interactions (Bean & Eaton 2001; Keup 2005; Barefoot 2004)

Writing Centres provide individualized writing assistance to students outside of their academic division (Bean & Eaton 2001; Beck & Davidson 2001; Griswold 2003).

Much of the common ground between these programs and the SLLS Writing Program includes characteristics which are discussed elsewhere in this literature survey: timely intervention, close interaction between faculty and students, individualized instruction, small class/group sizes and focus on active learning practices.

IV. Six Effective Administrative Policies

The available literature provides many procedural recommendations for remedial programming in order to maximize retention by fostering student success. Key findings are summarized below.

1. Make participation and placement in the program mandatory.

Although some researchers speculate about the impact of students feeling stigmatized by their participation in remediation, the key thrust of the literature strongly supports mandating that all students receive the assistance they need.

We provide some key quotes and findings in this regard below:

“Should academically deficient students be able to decide whether or not they enroll in remedial courses? We say no for several reasons. Academically deficient students have already demonstrated that their academic skills are below the minimum required to succeed in college-level courses. It follows that to correct those deficiencies, some type of remediation must take place… even open-door institutions have a right and a responsibility to set minimum standards that students must meet in order to take courses, enter programs, and fulfill degree requirements” (Moore and Carpenter 1985, p. 103).

Perin’s 2002 paper about developmental education practice also supports mandatory placement.

Colton (1999) cites student satisfaction with a remedial program in spite of its nature as a fundamentally intrusive intervention (p. 159).

Weissman et al (1997) recommend that “skill-deficient students

should be required to remediate" (p. 198).

Kozeracki's (2002) discussion of best practices in developmental education includes mandatory orientation, assessment and placement.

Phipps' (1998) survey of information about remediation programs in the U.S. strongly recommends mandatory assessment and placement program based on valid and reliable instruments.

Carini et al (2006) conclude that "institutional interventions to boost student engagement may have the greatest payoff for those most at-risk for leaving college prematurely" (p. 16). Also, "college students with the lowest SAT scores appeared to benefit more from [interventions] than those with the highest SATs. (p. 23).

Beginning in the fall of 2006, all students enrolling in Fanshawe's General Arts and General Arts and Sciences programs began to complete entrance testing and participated in the Writing Program. Additional program areas including Pre-Health and Business, have since followed suit.

2. Stream participants, not just to support foundational students, but to prevent disengagement of more competent students.

Streaming is an effective way of bridging between lower and higher skill levels:

"…it has been estimated that the incidence of academic unpreparedness has grown to the point where between 30 and 40 percent of entering freshmen are to some degree deficient in college-level reading and writing skills (Moore and Carpenter 1985: p. 98-99) and where approximately one-quarter of all freshmen take remedial coursework in either mathematics, writing or reading (U.S. Department of Education 1985)" (Tinto 1987, p. 52). Conversely, "If we neglect to test basic skills and consequently place students in courses for which they are over prepared, putting them through the same paces as in high school, they are not going to stay" (Noel, p. 11).

Dietsche's 1990 paper focusing on Ontario community colleges speculates that although under preparedness appears to be the main factor in departure for unsuccessful students, with successful students the issue may be a lack of academic challenge. He characterizes both kinds of dropouts as the result of a "poor fit" (p. 78).

Fanshawe's Writing Program consists of a remedial and a college-level course. Students can qualify to enter into the college-level course through sufficient performance on entrance testing.

3. Favour the use of experienced, full-time faculty within the program.

The use of full-time faculty for program delivery is seen as a positive practice in the literature for a few key reasons: studies discussed below conclude that full-time faculty are able to provide more and better support for student achievement and retention than do their part-time counterparts; the policy and guideline statements of a number of organizations of teaching writing support the preference of full-time faculty; and full-time faculty are better positioned to pursue professional development

opportunities that help them enhance their practice in the writing classroom.

Schibik (2004) finds a link between exposure to part-time faculty and retention. In examining data collected between 1997 and 2000 from over 7,000 students, he concludes that students taught by a 75-100% part-time complement of professors have 1.47 greater odds of attrition. Jacoby (2006) examines a data set collected from all of the publicly-funded two-year colleges in the US, finding that the schools with the lowest part-time faculty ratios have higher graduation rates, and that this effect is heightened among schools also having low faculty-student ratios. Comparing the schools with the highest ratios of part-time faculty to those with the lowest ratios, Jacobi reports that the graduation rates increased by about 4%. Ehrenberg & Zhang (2004) examine US College Board data for all reporting institutions and find that, “Other factors held constant, a 10 percentage point increase in the percentage of faculty that is part-time at a public academic institution is associated with a 2.65 percentage point reduction in the institution’s graduation rate” (p. 8).

Key differences between permanent, full-time professors and their part-time counterparts are their experience levels and the security of their status. A body of research exists suggesting that contingent faculty inflate grades, for example (Sonner, 2000; Johnson et al, 2006; Cavanaugh, 2006). Burgess & Samuels (1999) postulate that, possibly owing to inexperience combined with a desire for positive student evaluations, part-time professors communicate expectations less clearly and grade less stringently than do full-time professors. Their study compares student performances within a variety of sequenced courses, including English courses, among students who have been taught by various combinations of part-time and full-time faculty. They find that students do, in fact, receive higher marks on average in courses taught by part-time professors. They also find that the lowest grades in subsequent courses in a sequence are those received by students taught by full-time professors in the second course after having been taught by part-time professors in their first term. These findings would suggest that the conditions in which part-time professors operate ultimately disadvantage their students in terms of achievement.

Furthermore, because part-time professors may not be offered opportunities or have the time availability to pursue professional development to the same degree as full-time instructors, this area is another key difference that could disadvantage students being taught by non-full-time faculty. Wide agreement in the literature exists about the importance of professional development for writing instructors, perhaps best summarized by Kozeracki (2002): “The realization is dawning that literature and English composition instructors are not automatically able to teach developmental students and that individuals require special training to properly address the needs of students with basic reading and writing skills problems.” The recent Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student (Upcraft et al, 2005) devotes a chapter to the importance of faculty development to support new students.

By staffing the lion’s share of its writing courses with full-time staff, while at the same time facilitating much sharing of information, materials and approaches, SLLS is addressing the staffing issue to maximize effectiveness of the program.

4. Monitor and track attendance and participation in the program.

Providing a developmental writing program to increase retention is a noble gesture, but if students are not compelled to attend, often those most in need of this intervention will not receive its benefits. Barefoot (2000) emphasizes the concept of ensuring students spend “time on task,” which, as she explains, includes mandating attendance in all first-year courses, remedial or not. Beatty-Guenter (2007) agrees with this recommendation, supporting strong attendance policies as part of a retention effort.

In terms of implementation, we can see an interestingly stringent example in Fowler’s (2007) discussion of a developmental program implemented at Louisiana State University at Eunice whose policies included one requiring 90% attendance. Students not attending at least 90% of scheduled classes would automatically fail the course. Along with other rigid assessment and placement policies, this strategy was followed by increased success rates in developmental English composition between the 2003-2004 and 2005-2006 academic years from 65 to 70%. The percentage of students in good academic standing increased from 56 to 61% within one year of the adoption of this policy, with this rate rising to 71% the following year.

In keeping with this research recommendation, instructors in Fanshawe’s Writing Program are asked to keep and submit attendance data, and a component of the grade is made up of practical, hands-on tasks students complete in each class.

5. Establish an early warning system combined with quick feedback for writing assignments to contribute to a feeling of immediacy.

A student lacking in confidence can be plagued by feelings of uncertainty. Was the assignment completed correctly? When will I know? Would anyone notice if I were not here? A key aspect of proactive retention strategy will include ensuring ongoing communication with the at-risk student. This communication will include prompt feedback about work completed, as well as possibly unsolicited contact in the case of non-attendance.

Aulls (2004) and Barefoot (2004) identify the importance of early alert programs, which identify at-risk students for counselling, contact or additional academic help. In terms of regular academic feedback, Milligan (1992) reports on results of surveys of faculty and student attitudes about various aspects of the student retention puzzle. Prompt evaluations from professors was one of the few areas of agreement between faculty and students in terms of their importance as a dropout prevention strategy. The Curriculum Research Team at UNCA (2004) write of the importance of early communication with students about writing deficiencies, while Barefoot (2000) cites Chickering & Gamson’s seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education – “Principle Four: give prompt feedback.”

Instructors in the SLLS Writing Program commit to returning graded work within a week of receipt from the students, and a new development in the fall of 2007 includes follow-up with non-attending students by a Student Success Officer, which corresponds with these “best practices.”

6. Evaluate the program continuously.

Naturally, administrators of any successful program will have much better information about how successful it is if they conduct regular assessments of the program's effectiveness. The literature is so rife with recommendations that programs be evaluated as to acquire the value of a "motherhood statement." A key work, however, Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student (Upcraft et al, 2005) devotes the entire third part of the book to this important evaluation process, providing a wide range of dimensions by which measurement can occur, as well as many practical considerations. From its inception, the SLLS Writing Program was created with a strong research component to promote and facilitate measurement of results on an ongoing, term-by-term basis.

As we have seen through the above discussion, Fanshawe's Writing Program, to a concerted degree, adheres with these best procedural practices for retention and remediation programming.

V. Two Essential Practices within the Classroom

1. Ensure the program is student-centred and revolves around active learning.

The traditional stereotype of students passively listening to long lectures is patently contrary to good retention practice:

Astin (1984, cited in Andres & Carpenter, 1997) advises that "greater attention needs to be paid to the passive or unprepared student – the one most likely to drop out […] teachers [should] focus less on content and teaching techniques and more on student behaviours as a means for understanding student motivation and the amount of time and energy students spend on the learning process […] Peer interaction and quality learning teams have also been identified as useful" (p. 23).

Tinto (1997) focuses on the classroom dimension and on academic integration, arguing that active learning is a key tool for student engagement (p. 613).

Aulls (2004) reports students rate course experiences more positively when active learning is a key component (p. 322).

Braxton & Milem (2000) conclude that "active learning wield[s] a statistically significant influence on […] social integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and students' intent to return" (p. 581).

In Barefoot's (2000) national survey of first-year curricular practices designed to improve engagement and retention, she provides a list of best practices, including active learning.

Keup (2006) describes a study involving 19,995 students completing a student satisfaction survey at the end of their first year in various postsecondary institutions across the U.S. Conclusions call for "first-year programs and classroom practices that empower students to participate in class, facilitate their engagement with the material, and enhance students' feelings of satisfaction with academic experiences, particularly those related to classroom instruction and relevancy of the coursework […] Findings from the current research argue for smaller, more engaging classes for first-year students" (43-44).

2. Keep Class Sizes Small

Keup's (2006) findings (above) segue perfectly with this avenue of discussion, as small classes help faculty create active learning environments, especially within the specific context of a writing class for first-year students. As Tinto comments, "…it is ironic that during this first year of college, when contact with other students and faculty is so important to retention, so many institutions structure courses so as to discourage contacts. Freshman classes are frequently the largest on campus […] the short-tem economic gains thought to arise from greater efficiency in the allocation of resources (e.g. through large course enrollments) are often wrought at the expense of long-term losses in both retention and student development" (1987, p. 151-152). Since the issue of class size is so significant, it is examined in sub-sections below using several key interrelated points applicable to Fanshawe's Writing Program.

Smaller classes make possible the kind of action, interaction and individualized attention required in an intensive writing course.

We have discussed the applicability of Astin's Active Learning Theory to the writing program above. Below are some specific research findings which link small class sizes with active learning, writing programs, or both:

Braxton & Milem (2000) argue that active learning techniques are far easier to apply in smaller classes (p. 584).

Gilbert (1995) highlights the importance of smaller classes where higher level thinking, application, motivation and attitudinal change are primary, as is the case in the Writing Program.

Hassel & Lourey (2004) point to the tendency for smaller class sizes to support teaching effectiveness and individualized instructions as well as to discourage absenteeism and student disengagement (p. 7).

Roberts-Miller (2004) argues that "Larger class sizes preclude good teaching practices in that teachers are forced into objectivist teaching practices […] The more that a program emphasizes revision, with what Hillocks calls the 'environmental mode' of teaching (1980), multiple drafts, and teacher accessibility, the more than having small classes matters."

The UNCA Curriculum Research Team (2004) recommends that "to provide effective instruction, ample practice and feedback, writing intensive classes should be small, ideally 20 students and no more than 25." (p. 2).

Beatty-Guenter (2007) argues that remedial students tend to be passive and that smaller classes discourage passivity.

Keup (2006) uses the results of a survey of 19,995 students at the end of their first year in various postsecondary institutions across the U.S. to call for first-year postsecondary programming that empowers students and encourages their participation, specifically calling for smaller and more engaging classes.

Individual classroom activities vary within the writing program, but all professors engage in regular interactions within the classroom and assign an in-class essay to be written and returned, graded, on a weekly basis. The active learning and individualized attention required for these activities

call for small classes.

Student satisfaction as demonstrated through course evaluations is linked in the research literature to class size.

No leap of logic is required to assume that students who are satisfied are more likely to remain in higher education, so student satisfaction would be a key factor in retention. Various researchers posit that small class size makes possible the kinds of interactions that result in student satisfaction. Toy (1985) refers to Astin's (1977, pp. 223-233) conclusion that: "Student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other involvement variable, or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic. Students who interact frequently with faculty are more satisfied with all aspects of their institutional experience, including student friendships, variety of courses, intellectual environment, and even administration of the institution" (p. 384).

Furthermore, a number of key studies and meta-studies have specifically explored linkages between class size and student course evaluations:

- Collison (1991) reports that "Large classes are by far the most common subject of complaints among undergraduates" (p. 2).
- Gilbert's (1995) exploration of finds that "in almost all studies, students and faculty members tended to prefer small classes."
- Aulls (2004) reports that students surveyed about good and poor courses didn't recall any of the courses where classes were smaller as "poor" (p. 330)
- Wood et al (1974), Feldman (1984) and Fernandez & Mateo (1996, 1998) have all found a U-shaped curve in charting data for their various studies and meta-studies looking at the relationship between postsecondary class size and student course evaluations. Both very small and very large classes have the strongest ratings in student evaluations (for the purposes of these studies, very small classes typically have 15 or fewer students, while very large classes typically have 250 or more).

Research has shown the value of small classes in courses where higher-level thinking and individual attention are required.

While class size and student achievement are difficult to correlate in postsecondary education generally, the link may be easier to establish with remedial and writing courses because of the very nature of the activities undertaken in these classrooms.

- Maggio et al (2005) describe a study tracking results from 397 students forming a representative sample from 40 American colleges and universities in which all of the students were completing remedial / developmental summer programming prior to entering their first year of postsecondary study. The programs varied in length, enrollment size, and other factors. The researchers concluded that the size of enrollment had one of the most significant negative relationships on student achievement and retention and recommended that in remedial / developmental programs such as these, class sizes and student-faculty ratios be kept as small as possible to allow for individual attention.
- Although Glass et al (1979) find only small differences in

achievement in classes of 20 vs. 40 students, their evidence shows significantly higher achievement levels in classes with fewer than 20. They conclude that factors such as instructional procedures and subject matter should ultimately determine "whether the potential for increased learning those smaller classes create will be realized" (p. 43). Although their findings were challenged by subsequent researchers, key critics Hedges & Stock (1983), upon re-analyzing the data set, came to the same conclusions (Mier, 1984).

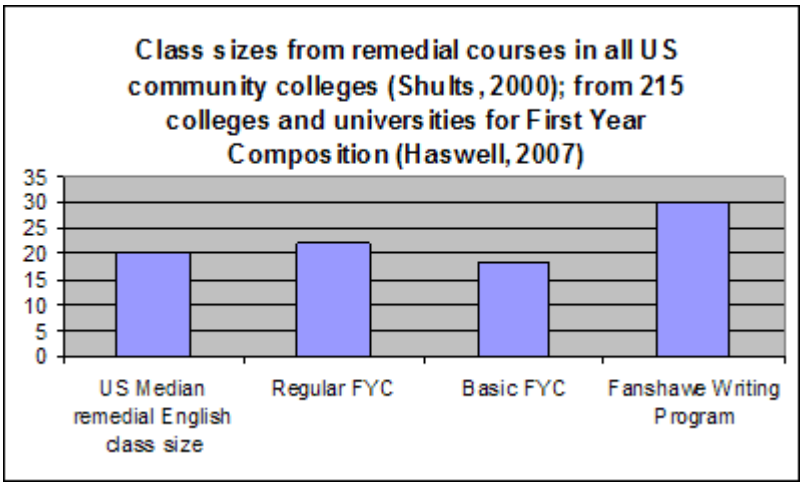
- Mier (1984) finds the literature especially supports the value of small classes to promote discussion, prewriting and revision and to allow faculty to provide individual attention.
- Knight (1991) compared student achievement in English 10001 among six campuses at Kent State University before and after class size caps for its prerequisite course, English 10000, were introduced, lowering average class size from 17 students to just over 12. He found statistically significant differences in grade achievement between the two cohorts.
- Follman, J. (1994) surveys the research literature and reports that linkages between class size and achievement are tenuous unless the class has fewer than 20, or better yet, less than 15 students; the author also points to literature showing that students and faculty favour smaller classes for their teaching effectiveness while larger classrooms tend to preclude higher-level thinking activities.

Since the bulk of the classroom activity in the Writing Program consists of active, hands-on and higher-level types of activities, smaller classes are justified according to the literature.

Smaller classes are a common, widely accepted practice in postsecondary remedial and developmental writing classes.

To the question "How can a college administrator defend small class sizes in introductory writing courses?", Haswell (2006) replies," There are three main answers: policy, research, practice." He provides details on class size caps for regular and basic-level courses at colleges and universities across the US, using data collected in 1998-99 and 2003-2006. Of the 211 schools documented, 103 offer basic writing, of which only 23 allow class sizes over 20, and only one of which allows a class size of up to 30 students. "Regular" first year composition courses are also offered at 205 of the 211 schools. Only a little more than half of the schools allow classes of over 20 students, and only 8 allow class sizes of 30 or more.

Shults (2000) provides a survey of remedial policies and practices within American community colleges, reporting that 65% of participating institutions had institutional class size limits, and almost three-quarters of these further limited sizes of remedial classes. Median class size in remedial writing, according to his figures, is 20 students among the approximately 400 American community colleges surveyed.



The Association of Departments of English (ADE) makes the following recommendations regarding teaching load:

"College English teachers should not teach more than three sections of composition per term. The number of students in each section should be fifteen or fewer, with no more than twenty students in any case. Class size should be no more than fifteen in developmental (remedial) courses" (ADE Policy Statements).

Similar statements are made by the National Council of Teachers of English:

"No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class. Ideal classes should be limited to 15. Students cannot learn to write without writing; in sections larger than 20, teachers cannot possibly give student writing the immediate and individual response necessary for growth and improvement" (NCTE Guidelines).

Conference on College Composition and Communication (1989) also echoes these guidelines:

"The teaching of writing … requires special attention to class size, teaching loads, the availability of teaching materials and the development of additional resources that enhance classroom instruction" […] "No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class. Ideally, classes should be limited to 15. Remedial or developmental sections should be limited to a maximum of 15 students. […] No English faculty members should teach more than 60 writing students a term. In developmental writing classes, the maximum should be 45." (p. 6)

By having class caps of 30 students and by continuing to work toward reducing class size, the Fanshawe Writing Program is acknowledging the recognized best practices for remedial and developmental writing.

VI. Research Supporting the Role of Remediation in Retention

Some authors do assert that remedial work is negatively linked to successful program completion. However, one or both of the factors discussed below typically influence these allegations:

- Students who take remedial courses are typically at a higher risk of attrition because of their lack of academic ability. As Dietsche (1990)

duly notes about the Ontario community college system, and Grayson (2003) also observes in the Canadian and US systems overall, lack of academic success is a highly significant factor in attrition, with weak academic performance contributing to almost twice the number of dropouts than other factors. The results of weak performance can range from failure and consequent program dismissal to simple withdrawal as a result of discouragement.

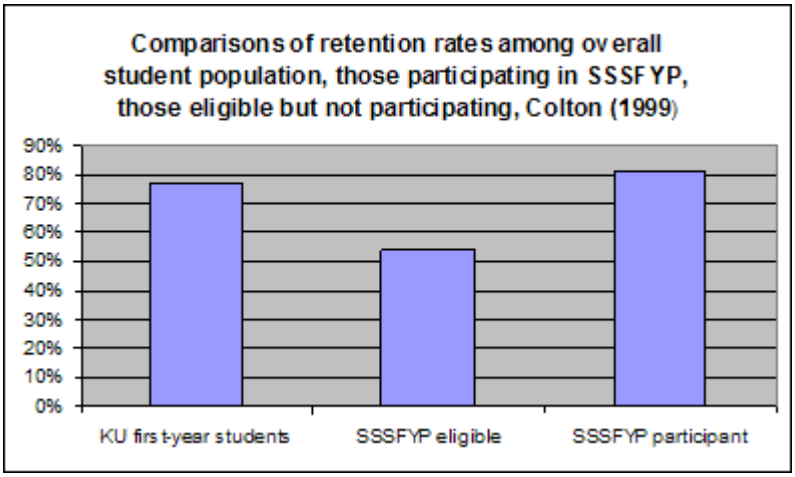
- Students who require remediation in math, reading, or both tend to be less likely to complete diplomas and degrees (Adelman 1998, Griffith & Meyer 1999, Grubb 2002).

To respond to the first point above, when studies factor academic and demographic background information into remediation/retention studies, even the most pessimistic results still show remedial students being about as likely to complete their studies as non-remedial students, in spite of their inherent academic disadvantage. Numerous other studies produce far more optimistic results, as we will see below.

With the latter phenomenon, we can point to the conclusions of Clifford Adelman, formerly a Senior Research Analyst with the U.S. Department of Education and a widely recognized authority on postsecondary completion issues. In his 1996 examination of the influence of remedial work on eventual program completion, he concludes that "we should not worry about students who take only one remedial course. For a majority of them, it is a course in writing […] Deficiencies in writing one's native language generally are 'fixable' (p. 2). Critics of remediation typically cite Adelman's scholarship in a highly selective manner.

Below we find a range of experimental findings which are more positive in their interpretation of remediation and its retention potential:

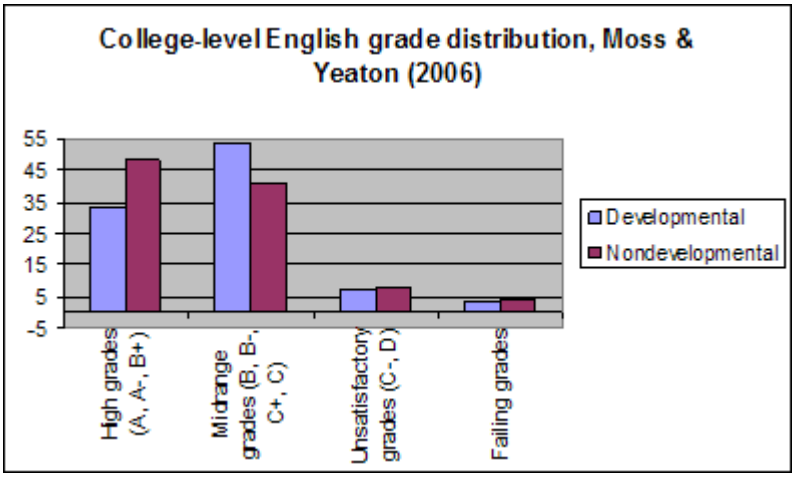
- Colton (1999) discusses a range of freshman year programs in existence, with a focus on the Student Support Services First Year Program (SSSFYP), consisting of freshman colloquia (which include writing, reading, reasoning and study skills), assessment testing and academic skills workshops, as well as other activities. Conclusions include higher retention rates for the program, even though the students participating in it are considered to be at a higher risk for failure and withdrawal.



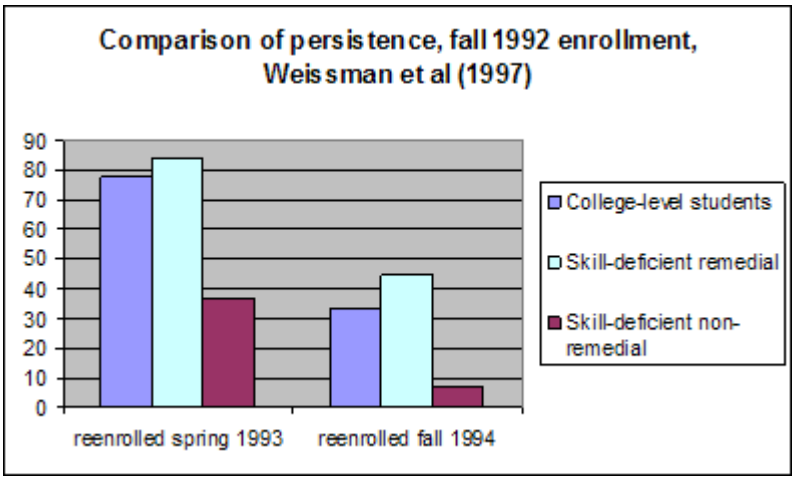
- Herzog (2005) examines the relationships of a number of factors with dropout, stopout, transfer and reenrollment, concluding that

remedial English students were more likely to reenroll.

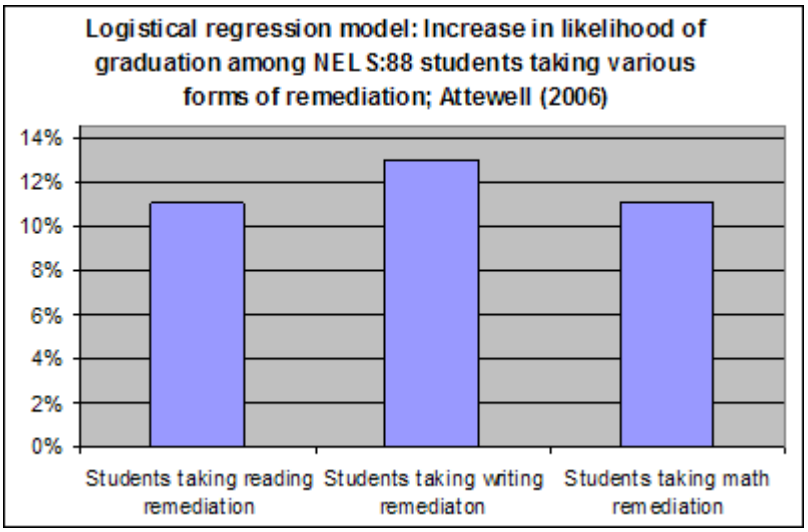
- Hoyt (1999) correlates retention data with students' need for remediation in various areas, recommending academic interventions, including remedial education.
- Moss & Yeaton (2006) study data generated by over 1,400 students in English, finding that developmental students showed and lower failure rate and a higher frequency of scores in the B and C ranges than non-developmental students.



- Griffith & Meyer (1999) discuss the successes of TASP (Texas Academic Skills Program). In 1996, researchers found that among students who had failed TASP on their first try, 42-75% passed on the second try after remediation, and the majority of students completing TASP received a C or better in their first college English class.
- Raab & Adam (2005) describe a remediation program in use at University College at Prairie View A&M in Texas, finding that students who had completed a remedial summer program prior to enrollment had retention rates of 79.2 %, compared to the overall institutional average of 67.7 %, and graduation rates of 40.6% versus an institutional average of 34.95 %.
- Boylan et al (1999) cite a 1996 study of over 20,000 Minnesota developmental students, reporting that "students who had passed one or more developmental courses obtained higher credit-to-course ratios, received higher grades, and were more likely to be retained than students who had not placed into developmental courses" (p. 93)
- Weissman et al (1997) examine case data for 1600 students, 1200 of whom were functioning at a college level and 400 who were not. Some remedial-level students received remediation; these students continued to under perform (in terms of GPA and persistence) the college-level students, but in turn outperformed students who needed remediation but did not receive it. Skills-deficient students who did not remediate had the highest attrition levels of the three groups. The study concludes that remediation should be required upon enrollment.

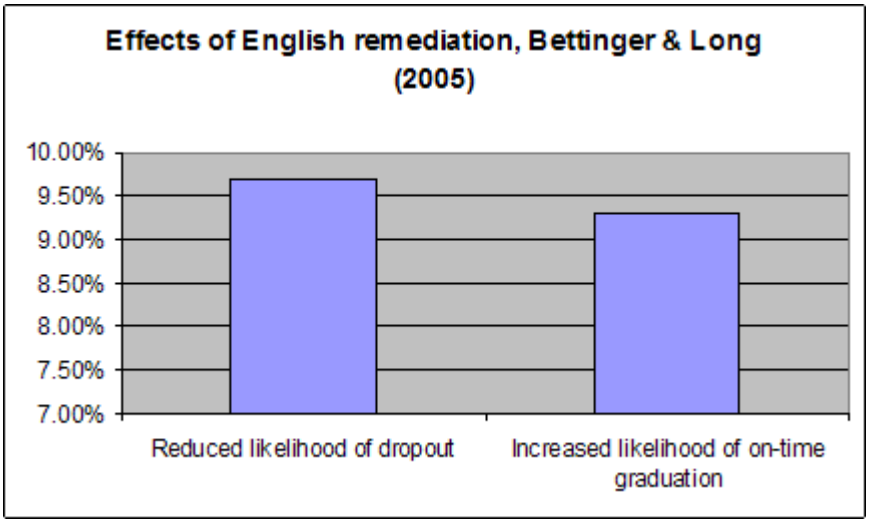


- Attewell et al (2006) present data from the NELS:88 Longitudinal Study (which followed a representational US national sample of students beginning in Grade 8 and following the sample through to college, coding coursework, credits, grades and programs completed). After statistically correcting for many variables in students' academic preparation and other background data, Attewell et al find "taking remedial courses in writing had no significant effect on graduation, for four-year college students, after controlling for academic background (p. 909) and that "students who took writing remediation in a two-year college were more likely to graduate with a degree (either associate's or bachelor's) than students of equivalent high school skills and social background who did not take remedial writing" (p. 911).



- Burley (1994) examines data produced by 27 separate studies. Although the data neither differentiate between type of remedial course nor correct for academic background, findings nonetheless conclude that remedial and non-remedial students have no significant differences in program completion, in spite of the fact that remedial students are at a higher risk.
- Bettinger & Long (2005) describe a study tracking 28,000 full-time, traditional-age public college freshmen over five years, finding that remedial students have better persistence than students with similar pre-college test scores and backgrounds who do not receive remediation. After correcting for data bias, they find that students receiving English remediation are 9.7% less likely to drop out and

9.3% more likely to graduate than non-remedial students of similar backgrounds. Glenn (2005) in describing the study, further reports that remedial English students were 17.3% more likely to complete a bachelor's degree within four years than students of comparable background who did not take remediation.



- Kreysa (2007) used data from 252 male and 186 female first-time university freshmen, finding that while remedial students typically have lower grade-point averages during their first semester than non-remedial students, they improve academically by their final semester. The study notes strong positive relationships between enrollment in remedial courses and graduation rates.

The above studies form a strong body of data indicating that remediation is helping students to complete postsecondary education, and in addition, appears to contribute positively toward improving students' overall academic performance.

VII. Conclusions

In postsecondary student attrition, the stakes are high. We are right to try to "minimize the loss of talent, the waste of limited educational resources, and the vocational, financial, and personal setbacks that result from student attrition in Canadian higher education" (Dietsche, 1990, p. 66).

Fanshawe's Writing Program can be seen as an effective retention strategy because of its consistency with the large and diverse body of literature focusing on student retention, as well as its adherence to administrative and classroom policies and practices that have been found to promote student success.

Moreover, as a remedial / developmental program, Fanshawe's Writing Program would be considered, based on this fact alone, to be a retention tool when the broad consensus of the literature is considered. In fact, its own findings confirm that the Writing Program has increased student retention within the General Arts and Sciences programming at Fanshawe College.

It would therefore follow that the Writing Program continue to expand its reach across divisions within the college, and that the many "best

practices" for retention and developmental education notes in the above report continue to be advanced and refined.

Terminology

While some sources, and to some degree, this report, use the terms "remedial" and "developmental" interchangeably, some sources make a key distinction. "Remedial" largely refers to interventions that seek to assist students to build skills that may have formed part of their high school curriculum, but for whatever reason have not been mastered prior to the students' enrollment in postsecondary education. The term "developmental," by contrast, is most often used to refer to course work that seeks to build skills to which students have not previously been exposed, but which they require in order to succeed in postsecondary education (Breneman et al, 1998; Kozeracki, 2002).

A note on terminology related to "retention". The terms retention/ attrition and persistence/withdrawal are used, sometimes interchangeably, throughout the literature. The issue here is mainly one of perspective: retention/attrition describes the issue from an institutional perspective while persistence/withdrawal represents a student perspective, i.e., whether to persist in one's studies or withdraw. While the term persistence for some carries a somewhat negative connotation in the sense of overcoming an unnecessarily arduous or onerous experience, from the perspective of "at risk" students, decisions do in fact revolve around whether to persist in or withdraw from a challenging situation. Use of terminology in this report typically echoes the usage of the respective authors

Canadian vs. US Institutions

Most of the research literature consulted looks at institutional data from the US. Barefoot's (2004) comments on the nature of the US two-year college system sound quite reminiscent of our Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology: "These institutions are 'open admission' and provide a smorgasbord of curricular offerings from arts and sciences to technical and occupational courses" (p. 10). Attewell et al (2006) report that 58% of students represented in the NELS:88 data who enrolled at two-year colleges took a remedial course or courses, while 26% of students in four-year colleges did so. It would appear, therefore, that in terms of need for remediation among the student body, the student population in the American two-year college system would be analogous to that found in our college system.

We also refer the reader to the Carnegie Foundation's classification system for comparisons of institutional type: http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=798

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